

Canada's British Columbia declares state of emergency as wildfires surge

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Smoke billows from a wildfire near Osoyoos, British Columbia, Canada July 19, 2021, in this picture obtained from social media [Twitter @DylanGaleas via Reuters]

Vancouver, July 20 (RHC)-- The Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) has declared a state of emergency amid a surge in wildfires that have forced hundreds of people from their homes and could

worsen in the coming days.

According to a provincial wildfire tracker, 299 blazes were actively burning across BC on Tuesday afternoon, including 18 that were sparked during the previous two days.

Mike Farnworth, BC's minister of public safety, said during a news conference that more than 3,180 firefighters and other staff are fighting fires across the province. He said more evacuations could be ordered as the weather forecast during the next few days may fuel the blazes. "We have reached a critical point," Farnworth told reporters.

"Based on the advice of emergency management and wildfire officials, and my briefing last night on the worsening weather, I am declaring a provincial state of emergency. This will address the potential for a mass-evacuation scenario and provide our government with the means to secure the accommodation spaces necessary to support evacuees."

The state of emergency will last for at least 14 days and can be extended, the BC government said in a statement. Forty evacuation orders affecting approximately 5,724 people are currently in place, while 69 evacuation alerts – under which residents are told to be ready to leave their homes at a moment's notice – affecting more than 32,000 people have also been issued.

BC was among several provinces in Western Canada that saw record temperatures last month as a so-called "heat dome" trapped in hot air over the region. Several wildfires were sparked at that time amid extremely dry conditions and a surge of lightning strikes. The village of Lytton, BC, was burned to the ground after a fast-moving blaze engulfed the community, killing two residents, just after it broke the country's all-time heat record.

Officials said the heatwave contributed to hundreds of deaths in BC alone, particularly among vulnerable elderly people. Earlier this month, the Canadian government announced new measures aimed at preventing wildfires during periods of extreme heat.

In a statement on July 11, the federal transport department said railway operators would need to reduce the speed of trains when temperatures go beyond 30 Celsius (86 Fahrenheit), as well as ensure trains are not running with combustible materials that could start a fire.

Brian Wiens, managing director at Canada Wildfire, a research consortium, told Al Jazeera this month that "very, very hot, dry weather is not unusual for late July into August in BC, in particular, and Alberta, as well."

But the June heatwave was "stronger and earlier" than seen before, Wiens said. He also said for temperatures to stay above the range deemed typical for an extended period of time was a "pretty strong indication that we're seeing evidence of a shift in climate here."

Many experts have pointed to climate change as a factor that has worsened extreme weather events such as wildfires, heatwaves and tropical storms. The Western United States is also experiencing a surge in wildfires, with hundreds of firefighters deployed to try to get massive blazes in the states of Oregon and California under control.

The wildfires in the western US and Canada are sending smoke eastward, worsening air quality and causing colourful sunsets in some places.

More than 80 large wildfires in 13 western states charred nearly 1.3 million acres (526,090 hectares), an area larger than the state of Delaware, by Tuesday, according to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho.

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